**Doehring Sample Assignment**

**Part 1: Self-care through spiritual practices**

My primary spiritual practice is listening to sacred choral music from a collection of choral works on my computer and from the webcasts of services/music from Trinity College Choir, Cambridge, England and St. Thomas Episcopal Church, NYC, NY. Choral music helps me become emotionally attuned and more aware of where I am holding stress in my body. Music helps me experience self-transcendence and goodness in my body and also helps me search for meanings that bring poetry/sacred texts together with classical choral music. My religious and spiritual practices bring moments of beauty and goodness that give me hope for the future and a sense of being at home in my body, relationships and creation. “Beauty can draw us home” ([J. B. Nelson, 2004, p. 168](#_ENREF_13)).

I also participate in worship at St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, Denver, where my deceased husband was an emeritus priest, where the progressive theology, choral music, and liturgy fit my love of classical choral music and my postmodern faith. The music and liturgy of the Anglican/Episcopal tradition offer me ways to re-experience my childhood wonder for the beauty of Christian symbols, while retaining a critical interpretation of their historical context. I feel known and respected by the rector, choir director, organist and congregants, and have received ongoing pastoral care, especially in moments of crisis. The memorial services for my son Alex and my husband George were celebrated here and their ashes are interred within the altar. (approx. 375 words)

**Part 2: A life-changing experience**

The younger of my two sons, Alex (27 years old) ended his life on June 13, 2018. Many aspects of Alex’s life and death remain an ineffable mystery. What I know, as a mother, is that Alex faced extraordinary limits when depression took over his life, on and off, over the past ten years. The past six months were his worst experience of being sucked down into the pit of depression that constricted his life and made him feel so different from other people. Depression was a disability that limited his life in dramatic ways, especially in being able to take steps toward leaving home and living on his own.

Alex carried many wounds from struggles with depression. As his family, we carried invisible wounds, from harrowing times of keeping him alive. Whenever his disability was in the foreground, as it had been in the past six months, our experience of Alex narrowed to focusing on his wounds and diagnosis. It was hard to step back and see Alex in all of his complex beauty and mystery, especially in grieving his death and understanding his decision to end his life. (190 words)

**Part 3: The automatic stress/emotion-based theology/spiritual orienting system of initial values, beliefs, and coping**

**Initial Emotions:** Shock, anguished grief, anxiety, guilt, urgency to do immediate tasks related to death

**Initial Values:**

*Responsibility for Alex’s struggles as his mother:* For Alex’s last six months I had been trying to help him hold onto life until his depression eased. He had episodes of being close to choosing death which my husband and I had weathered. As his family, we carried invisible wounds, from harrowing times of keeping him alive.[[1]](#endnote-1) The call from the police was a shock but not a surprise, since we had nearly lost him to suicide a number of times in the past. My stress responses often made me anxious, especially when I re-experienced childhood values of feeling solely responsible for others; in this case, for Alex’s well-being—a role I had learned as child in looking after younger brothers and a younger sister. My family’s Germanic ethnic values made me want to cope by being self-reliant and independent, increasing conflicts and when an how to seek help.

*Truth-telling vs Privacy:* I was raised in a family that kept emotional and psychological struggles private—even unnamed. Family values around privacy came from my parents’ working class background in which family members struggling with mental health issues did not know how to seek or get help, and also from my parents’ experiences of being a nuclear family that moved far from extended family because of high values around achievement related to education and work. My mother’s Catholicism and experiences of being judged by priests for using birth control in the mid-1950’s led her to associate emotional and mental health struggles with sin, increased fears of being judged/shunned by others, and beliefs that suffering comes from personal sinfulness.

*Religious tradition/obedience vs theological/spiritual authenticity*: In beginning to plan Alex’s memorial service, I struggled with beliefs in resurrection that came out of a premodern worldview of heaven above/earth below, and which, it seemed to me, prematurely removed the sting of death through visions of heaven and afterlife. While I had an immediate and visceral rejection of such beliefs as not meaningful for me or Alex, childhood values about complying with religious authority made me question whether I could make public my search for meanings if I rejected traditional Christian beliefs about resurrection and life after death, which are woven throughout funeral liturgies.[[2]](#endnote-2)

My values of religious obedience came out of my childhood internalization of my mother’s catholic faith and her fears that if she was not dutiful and obedient as a wife and mother, suffering would result. For example, after giving birth to my older sister and me (18 months apart) while she and my father lived in a trailer—graduate housing for married students at the University of Indiana in the 1950s) during the completion of his PhD studies, she started using birth control. When she received news that her father had been diagnosed with prostate cancer, she immediately went to a priest to confess her sin. The priest berated her, she stopped using birth control and immediately became pregnant with my brother (born 18 months after me). This brother had many childhood struggles, was an alcoholic all of his life, was often homeless and served two jail sentences. He died at 63 of lung cancer.

*Duty and Concern for others:* I acted on my concern for others by being the one to break the news of Alex’s death to each family member, to prepare my home for visiting family members, and to prepare the memorial service. My sense of duty and concern for others came out of being the sister among 5 children who was put in charge when my parents travelled, who was my father’s confidant as a teenage and adult, who sometimes acted as the emotional and caring hub because of my parents’ difficulties with intense emotions and relational conflict, and who provided direct care for my brother, especially in the last five years of his life in Denver when he was often homeless and then went through a terminal illness. Values around duty and concern for others made it sometimes hard to sort out my needs from others’ needs, especially in the midst of intense grief.

**Initial Beliefs:**

*Struggles with individualistic moral theologies of suffering:* Individualistic moral theologies about suffering—that Alex’s death was his and my fault—increased my moral stress of feeling responsible for Alex’s suffering and death, and my fears of being judged by those in authority (God/psychiatric experts). These beliefs came of our my internalization of my mother’s Roman Catholicism, from negative experiences with priests and within Catholic school systems, and from struggles of the patriarchy of my childhood and adolescent experience of the Roman Catholic Church. These moral theologies could easily make me experience God as judge; mental health as an individual, private moral duty, with failure to maintain one’s or a family member’s mental health as sin, which could lead to being shunned by one’s community.

*Struggles with traditional references to the resurrection in funeral services*: Resurrection beliefs in the immediate aftermath of a tragic death were jarring because they seemed to me to offer premature reassurances in ways that foreclosed sharing lament and anguish. Struggles with resurrection beliefs came out of my father’s skepticism, my undergraduate studies in post-structural literary criticism that made me appreciate biblical texts as literary texts, and from graduate studies in biblical critical interpretation which made me reject naïve beliefs in resurrection and to interpret (1) the original ending of Mark’s gospel as representing the church’s experience of the empty tomb as final and (2) the account in Acts of the Holy Spirit as the earliest resurrection experience, which involved the resurrection of the community of followers and not the physical resurrection of Jesus. Such struggles with resurrection beliefs were intense during my 17 years as a church minister in preparing and delivering Easter sermons.

*Struggles with exclusive childhood meanings*: My childhood experiences of my father’s skepticism and my mother’s Catholicism as absolutely true made me anxious about how to respect other’s beliefs and represent the multiplicity of my religious beliefs. My anxiety made me view someone’s beliefs as all or nothing (e.g., exclusively skeptical, in my father’s case). For example, I initially worried that being ordained as a Presbyterian meant I had to keep secret my struggles with resurrection beliefs I worried that Alex’s skepticism was absolute, ruling out any Christian symbols in a memorial service for him. Throughout my nine years in full-time ministry in the 1980s I struggled with fears that I would be judged for the ways I questioned beliefs---like beliefs in the resurrection, and sometimes had dreams about appearing before a ‘supreme’ court of Presbyterian judges. When I was church organized doing MDiv studies in the 1970s the minister I worked for was charged with heresy for peaching process theology and then went through a heresy trial conducted by the Presbytery of Montreal.

*Struggles with inclusivism*: In my search for meanings, I did not want to imply that my search for meanings was either exclusively true for all of those who mourn a death like Alex’s, or inclusively true, as though my meanings would apply to all those who mourn tragic deaths like Alex’s. As Hedges notes, “The most telling critique against an inclusivist approach is that it forms the other religion into the pattern of one’s own, thereby denying its inherent integrity” ([Hedges, 2010, p. 159](#_ENREF_11)).

**Initial Coping:**

*Work harder:* a default way of coping from the past was to work harder at tasks in which I felt competent. This way of coping came from my father’s work ethic and his financial responsibility for the family. The ‘cons’ of coping through hard work is that it makes me self-reliant, stubborn, isolated, and increases my values of being morally responsible for my survival and others. The ‘pros’ of such coping is that I don’t usually procrastinate over challenging and necessary tasks, even tasks related to a traumatic death.

*Caring for Alex:* Caring for Alex’s body, his possessions, and settling his financial matters as a mother could have increased my feeling solely responsible for his care, my moral beliefs that others would judge him and that this sorting should be done as quickly and privately as possible (the cons of such coping). The pros were that if I did such care as a way to grieve, it could promote a kind of grieving bit by bit—a phrase Freud ([Freud, 1917/1994](#_ENREF_8)) used in his essay “Mourning and Melancholia”—through the materiality of caring for his body and his possessions.

*Searching for meanings* was initially challenging but also an immediate necessity involving breaking the news to my husband and then within a few hours, to my older son and his wife, then within another hour to our minister, and then to family members and Iliff colleagues, with follow-up announcements going out almost right away to our church family, Iliff, the Presbytery of Denver and the Society for Pastoral Theology gathering in Atlanta where I had responsibilities and was due the next day. The necessity of sharing and announcing what happened to Alex immediately engaged me in searching for meanings as a way of coping amidst moral struggles around conflicting values and beliefs. The cons of this immediate search for meanings that was public were risks of making public premature meanings that I regretted later in my long term search for meanings. The pro of the immediate public sharing of meanings was accessibility to social support, especially with trusted others.

(approx. 2050 words including footnotes)

**Part 4:** **How was your embedded theology/spiritual orienting system and your moral stress shaped by intersecting social systems?**

*Religious sexism:*My values of feeling solely responsible for others’ well-being along with my duty to conform to absolute religious beliefs come from trying to be a good girl raised in Catholic churches and schools; also from my birth order as the one in charge of my brothers and sisters when my parents were away.

*Classism:* My father’s education provided social status and financial security and reinforced a work ethic that possibly over-valued these aspects of social identity as the key to survival and independence.

*Racism & current social class:* My being identified as white and an educated professional (especially a licensed psychologist) was an advantage within mental health and legal systems, especially when my son needed emergency mental health care and legal care.

*Citizenship:* Being a US citizen gave my son access to Medicaid, which covered costs of hospitalizations and mental health care.

*Note: While I experienced spiritual practices as a central resource, I know that many other aspects of my life sustained me: first and foremost, meaningful work, as well as good habits, like healthy eating and exercise: I also am very fortunate to be in a stable marriage and family, and have access to extensive social support. Without all of these life-giving routines and resources, spiritual practices may have not been as effective.*

(approx. 216 words)

**Part 5. Describe your intentional theology**

**Spiritual practices:** Music helped me experience goodness and grieve Alex. I chose a choral work for the choir to sing after my words of remembrance: Good Night, Dear Heart by Dan Forrest (b.1978), who set this poem by Robert Richardson, chosen by Mark Twain for the tombstone on the grave of his daughter, Sarah who died at age 20:

Warm summer sun shine kindly here,

Warm summer wind blow softly here,

Green sod above lie light, lie light;

Good night, dear heart, good night, good night.

 The choir also sang a setting of a favorite hymn, “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy” that described my theology of God’s love.

My search for meanings was also a spiritual practice that helped me grieve Alex’s death and share anguish with others whose adult children had died tragically, some by suicide. It was especially helpful to hear how much mental health struggles had shaped their children’s lives, which helped remind me over and over again that we had tried our best to help Alex with his struggles.I was fortunate to have conversation partners with which to voice my struggles as I searched for meanings. Sheila Davaney, Larry Graham's wife, herself a feminist theologian, helped me decide on the parable of the good Samaritan as the gospel reading for the memorial service, after I had spent hours going through the gospels and rejecting the usual funeral gospel readings and parables about sinners and the righteous.

Spiritual care conversations with my rector, Elizabeth Randall, were an invaluable part of my spiritual practices. She was respectful of my spiritually fluid religious identity. Her homily offered a public theology of God’s love that included my worldview and spoke to common values and beliefs among a religiously diverse gathering of family and friends.

**Coping**

*Focus on tasks related to caring for Alex:* My immediate focus on tasks related to caring for Alex, his body, his possessions, and his finances could easily have been a private way to quickly dispense with shame–inducing aspects of Alex’s life and death. Instead of feeling solely responsible for doing these tasks privately, I found ways to share these tasks by including immediate family in Alex’s cremation and in sorting through Alex’s belongs. Being able to immediately begin sorting through his possession after his death helped me find and read his journals and return to these over and over again in sharing anguish and searching for meanings; also for reclaiming the goodness of his life.

I experienced these tasks as particular ways of sharing anguish and lament, by taking the time needed to fully experience what it meant to pray over Alex’s body and release it to be cremation and to do the same with possessions like his cell phone. Being grounded in compassion through spiritual practices helped me lovingly care for Alex’s body, his possession, and settling his financial matters as a mother, which became a way to materially grieve bit by bit.

*Truth-telling vs Privacy:* I was able to set aside this embedded value of privacy in favor of my intentional value of truth-telling, which made me immediately decide to say in public announcements that Alex chose to end his life, had long struggles with depression, and had received good mental health care. I wanted to make public these three most salient features of his death, knowing that this would help people know what to say to us, and would create solidarity with those who had experienced similar struggles and losses. Truth telling became a way of coping by being spiritually authentic.

**Values:**

*Caring for Alex’s body and ashes:*

My way of coping through immediate tasks was a way to enact values of being a mother by caring for my son’s body, ashes, and material possession.I chose to attend the cremation of Alex’s body as a time of caring for and releasing his body. My husband and I, my older son and his wife, and my brother and sister laid hands on the covering over Alex’s body. We read some of his poetry, offered prayers and commended his body to be cremated. Then we bore witness to his body entering into the fire that would reduce his body to ashes.

During the first hymn of the memorial service, Alex’s brother Jordan and I carried his ashes up to the front of the church. We placed them on a table in front of the altar. At the end of the service, Jordan and I went up together and I carried the ashes up to the altar where the Elizabeth blessed them and then I placed them in a drawer under the altar (the columbarium) where they will remain. I'd like to have my ashes mixed with Alex's when the time comes.  We interred some of Alex's ashes under a fig tree beside a family home on Vashon Island off of West Seattle, where Alex spent many summer days with cousins from the age of five onwards.

*Seeking physical and psychological health:* I found solace in the ways I supported Alex in finding good mental health care and in working with his team. This helped me understand better the extent of Alex’s struggles, and to be the best mother I could through reaching out to his mental health team, especially during and after crises. I have made use of my employee benefits to find a good psychologist with whom I meet.

I was grateful that Alex made a significant life change in making a commitment to sobriety three months before his death.This life change helped him cope better with despair and anger, especially when he felt alone at night. Sobriety helped him meditate, concentrate on his writing and read poetry—most recently, Jack Kerouac’s *Haikus*. He wrote poems in a journal which I did not read until after his death. There are not many entries until after he chose sobriety, when he began writing haiku poems, often about something that caught his attention, like the sight of a tree or cloud when we were driving somewhere, or the sounds on an airplane trip we took. It seems to me, in retrospect, that his sobriety helped him read more, concentrate better, and to use words to pay attention, wonder, and search for meanings by juxtaposing a sight or sound with words like “mystery” and “holy.”

**Beliefs:**

*Interrogating and protesting individualistic moral theologies of suffering; moving toward radical theologies of suffering:* Like feminist theologian Susan Nelson (2003), I question a moral understanding of Alex’s suffering: “Would a good God let radical suffering so erode the human spirit that all hope is lost (and would that lost hope be justly charged to the sufferer as the sin of despair)?” ([S. L. Nelson, 2003, p. 402](#_ENREF_14)). Over the years I have developed a more complex moral understanding of his struggles. When used to think about collective rather than individual sin, the moral approach helps me understand how familial, social and cultural systems contribute to the suffering of those struggling with mental illness, and that we all, as a society, need to be held accountable. Spiritual care is not just about caring for persons; it’s about social justice that challenges life-limiting and destructive systems that exacerbate suffering. I found Debbie Creamer’s theology of limits meaningful for reflecting on Alex’s struggles with depression: “Human life is, in so many ways, an experience of limits….Instead of cementing disability as a distinct and separate category of otherness,…consider the ways in which limits are normal, unsurprising, fluid and even good” ([Creamer, 2012, p. 341](#_ENREF_5)). “When we dismiss disability as being an exceptional and othering experience, we deny the normality of limits in all of our lives, pretend that we do not experience increasing limits as we age, and even refuse to acknowledge the future limit of death” ([Creamer, 2009, p. 119](#_ENREF_4)).

Rejecting an individualistic moral paradigm of Alex’s suffering allowed me to lament using a radical[[3]](#endnote-3) paradigm: “The paradigm of radical suffering stands in this place of suffering and incoherence, recognizes everything such evil threatens, realizes that this evil cannot be justified but must be resisted, and asks in the face of such evil, ‘Where is God?’ or ‘What kind of God... ? or ‘Is there a God at all?’” (Nelson, 2003, p. 403). I understood his genetic predisposition and struggles with mental illness as a tragedy: “The essential tragic experience is irreparable human loss” ([Eagleton, 2003, p. 4](#_ENREF_7)) that often cannot be redeemed through heroic ways of coping with disability. “Tragedy stresses how we are acted upon rather than robustly enterprising, as well as what meager space for maneuver we often have available” (Eagleton, 2003, p. xvi).

*Affirming beliefs in God’s love that seeks justice and embraces outcasts:* In my search for meanings on what I wanted to say at Alex's memorial service, I worked with my Episcopal rector, Elizabeth Randall, on using the New Zealand *Book of Prayer* funeral service as the basis for our memorial service. I found its contemporary language fit my religious world better than the *Book of Common Prayer*. I set aside most of the references to resurrection/heaven and chose the prayers and texts that spoke about God’s love and the love of community as what sustains us and helps us find hope in the face of death.

In her homily, Elizabeth Randall used the texts I had chosen from the Hebrew Bible (Isaiah 49:8b-15*)* and the gospel (the parable of the Good Samaritan found in Luke 10:25-37*)* to affirm God love.

*Affirming a God of love who suffers with us:*I am drawn to process theology’s way of describing God’s power as a relational process of becoming. “God’s power is persuasive and relational rather than unilateral; ordered by love and compassionate judgment” ([Graham, 2006, pp. 11-12](#_ENREF_9)). “The alternative to omnipotence lies in the risky interactivity of relationship. In the language of process theology [God’s power] ‘lures’ them collectively and individually toward self-actualization” ([Keller, 2008, p. 89](#_ENREF_12)).

*Rejecting exclusive childhood meanings and embracing religious multiplicity and spiritual fluidity*: My religious struggles with exclusive truth of childhood beliefs (my father’s skepticism and my mother’s Catholicism) arose from being spiritually fluid, as Bidwell (2018, p. 2) notes: “Spiritually fluid people evoke prejudice and curiosity uncover assumptions, and disrupt our typical labels; they undermine religious authority, complicate religious communities, and blur social categories. Their lives question ordinary assumptions about pure, static, and singular religious identities.” It helped to remember that Alex was not exclusivist in his search for meanings, which freed me to find meanings that could speak to the diversity of those who gathered to share grief. Reading about religious hybridity[[4]](#endnote-4) and spiritual fluidity ([Bidwell, 2018](#_ENREF_3)) helped me respect both my and Alex’s spiritual fluidity. The millennial generation does not experience the same struggles with religious conformity. Nor does this generation tend to hold exclusivist beliefs. Most of those gathering to support us were similar to us in this way and would likely find the service meaningful.

*Struggles with inclusivism*: In my search for meanings, I did not want to imply that my search for meanings was either exclusively true for all of those who mourn a death like Alex’s, or inclusively true, as though my meanings would apply to all those who mourn tragic deaths like Alex’s. As Hedges notes, “The most telling critique against an inclusivist approach is that it forms the other religion into the pattern of one’s own, thereby denying its inherent integrity” ([Hedges, 2010, p. 159](#_ENREF_11)). I echo Bidwell’s rejection of inclusivism: “I do not believe that God is one or that all paths reach the same mountain. Religions are not different descriptions of a single reality; they describe different (and sometimes related) realities” (Bidwell, 2018, p. 7). I wanted to represent my search for meanings as particular to me; in this way, using a particularist approach to religions in the world that respects differences without making exclusivist claims, which I hear Bidwell affirming when he asks and answers the question,

How can there be more than one ultimate reality? I’m not sure; it’s a paradox. I’ve decided to live with that unknowing. For me, it’s more important to preserve the possibility of multiplicity than to reconcile it all with a logical solution. To insist on a singular ultimate reality beyond or behind all religious expressions becomes, for me, a type of violence; it risks the erasure of real differences. (2018, p. 7)

I also support a pluralist approach to the ways many religious traditions search for meanings amidst tragedy, appreciating that my particular meanings would speak to common aspects of tragic deaths through suicide, especially those explored through theologians writing about moral injury, as well as limits and disabilities. As someone presenting a public contextual theology of a death like Alex’s in an interfaith context like his memorial service, I wanted to model a hospitable approach to religious difference by combining a particularist approach with a pluralist approach that promotes a radical openness to the ways in which all religions may be true.[[5]](#endnote-5) Hedges critiques particularism for its premise—that religions are ‘monolithic cultural islands’—a premise not meaningful for younger generations who are more spiritually fluid. “Religious identities always have fluid edges marked by hybridity and multiplicity” (Hedges, 2010, p. 229). In sharing my search for meanings in a public context, I wanted to function as both a mother and a pastoral theologian who combines a particularist and pluralistic approach that respects religious differences, religious multiplicity, and spiritual fluidity. As someone familiar with research on religious and spiritual struggles ([Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Krause, & Ironson, 2015](#_ENREF_1); [Pargament, Wong, & Exline, 2016](#_ENREF_16)), I wanted to use life-giving religious practices and meanings that would

* connect with beauty/goodness/love through ritual and music,
* search for complex contextual meanings that can bear the weight of suffering
* foster flexible ways of sharing anguish, meanings, and sources of hope
* facilitate spiritual wholeness an integration as persons, families and communities.[[6]](#endnote-6)

*Acknowledging and lamenting the limits of our love:* Tragically, moments of hope and goodness weren’t enough to help Alex climb out of the pit of depression, and take the first steps toward the kind of life he longed for: finding meaningful work and love relationships that would help him leave home. I relied on religious traditions of lament in naming the limits Alex experienced

* through genetics that predisposed him to depression.
* through a society that so often measures worth in terms of accomplishments
* through lack of affordable housing, which made it so hard for Alex to leave home, or for those with mental illness to find shelter.

In the end, I lamented the limits of family love, which could not safeguard Alex once he had made his decision to end his life.

Given all of these limits, I had to acknowledge that we did our best, as parents, as family, as his mental health team.

*Sharing anguish helps us bear it:* Sharing anguish helps us bear it, as my dear friend Larry Graham ([Graham, 2017, p. xiii](#_ENREF_10)) wrote. Confessing our limits helps us knit together those webs that hold us in love. Larry Graham’s words offer encouragement. He gently asks, “Where is your web still torn, even after your efforts to repair and heal? What are the strands in the web that remain that give *you* life and keep you going?” ([Graham, 2017, p. 128](#_ENREF_10)).

What gives us life and keeps us going? What helps us take up the strands of life and once again knit webs of love connecting us to each other? What can we carry forward from Alex’s life and death? I believe that we need to continue to do our best in supporting each other, especially when we come up against our limits. We need to work together to protest moral attitudes toward disabilities that make us feel like failures if we don’t heroically overcome our limits or disabilities. We need to protest the marginalization of people who are stigmatized because of their limits and disabilities. We need to do our best to protect and hold onto each other, when death seems the only way to end pain. And when our loved ones end their lives, we need to hold each other: sharing anguish, searching for meanings, and reclaiming goodness.[[7]](#endnote-7)

*Honoring the complexity and mystery of Alex and respecting his decision to end his life:*  Whenever Alex’s disability was in the foreground, as it had been in the past six months, our experience of Alex narrowed to focusing on his wounds and diagnosis.[[8]](#endnote-8) I affirm the words spoken by Elizabeth Randall in her homily:

Alex’s experience is uniquely his own.

Some of it we know,

About some of it we can wonder,

And some of it will remain hidden.

His life, his struggles,

His ultimate choice, Are his.

Alex’s story belongs to him.

On the last night before Alex took his life, I watched him, as he sat for a long time looking out at the sun setting on the mountains. His face was calm. He was not angry. He seemed at peace. He seemed open to the beauty of the world. He told me not to worry. I hear his words now as a blessing—his way of saying good bye.

(approx. 3000 words)

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1. Theologian Shelly Rambo describes the hidden wounds of trauma in terms of gospel narratives about the wounds of Jesus who appears after his death to his followers:

“To probe the afterlife via the trajectory of trauma provides a different entrance into the classic questions of Christian faith….There is no clear cut line separating the two; life is not a departure from death but, instead, a different relationship to death and life. In a posttraumatic age, they exist simultaneously rather than sequentially. The return of Jesus reveals something about *life in the midst of death.* If we take the line between life and death to be more porous, as the context of trauma suggests, then resurrection is not so much about life overcoming death as it is about *life resurrecting amid the ongoingness of death*. The return of Jesus marks a distinct territory for thinking about life as marked by wounds and yet recreated through them” ([Rambo, 2017, p. 7](#_ENREF_18)). Rambo’s (2017) exploration in *Resurrecting Wounds: Living the Afterlife of Trauma* has particular narrative meanings for me in terms of my own trauma history and scholarly focus on trauma. When I was 27, having just experienced the goodness of my body in the birth of my first son, Jordan, I went on a two day silent retreat at a Jesuit center in Guelph, Ontario. Memories of a childhood trauma emerged. Under the direction of a wise Jesuit, I faced fears that I could not protect my child from danger and I experienced for the first time a profound sense of Jesus with me in my childhood suffering. I reclaimed wounds from this trauma, and wrote a prayer that concluded with these words:

 “You were not ashamed of your wounds.

You showed them to Thomas

As marks of your ordeal and death

I will no longer hide these wounds of mine.

I will bear them gracefully.

They tell a resurrection story.” ([Doehring, 1995](#_ENREF_6))

I chose an opening hymn that spoke to these images of the wounded Jesus appearing after his death: “"We walk by faith" set to the tune St. Botolph. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. It could be that a redemptive understanding of Alex’s death will become relevant in the long term retrospective process of meaning-making. At some future time I may look back on his suffering, and hold onto the horror of suffering even as I reclaim the goodness of life. The redemptive perspective on suffering could, at some future time, help me retrospectively look back and see how new life was eventually experienced through the long-term process of coming to terms with a death that could have been wholly destructive. I can also see the wisdom of Shelly Rambo’s descriptions of the ways that trauma continues to co-exist with glimpses of new life. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “The term "radical suffering" is borrowed from Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990). Farley defines radical suffering as suffering that destroys the human spirit and cannot be justified. Radical suffering cries out not for theodicy but for vindication” (Nelson, 2003, p. 399). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “Religious multiplicity—the experience of being shaped by, or maintaining bonds to, more than one spiritual or religious community at the same time—is occurring more frequently in the United States and Europe. In other parts of the world, religious multiplicity has long been a norm. As more and more people transgress religious boundaries, this multiplicity becomes more visible. We increasingly encounter spiritually fluid people in public life, at school, at work, at backyard cookouts, and at the health club” (Bidwell, 2018, pp. 1-2). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. A three-fold typology of comparative approaches to religion as exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist was first proposed by Race ([1983](#_ENREF_17)), as cited by Hedges (2010). The category of particularism was added by Hedges ([Hedges, 2010](#_ENREF_11)). Here are simple descriptions of these terms:

Exclusivism: radical discontinuity among religions (e.g., Christianity is the only truth)

Inclusivism: radical fulfillment (Possibilities for many paths to same end)

Pluralism: radical openness (All religions may be true)

Particularism: radical differences need to be respected (Each religion is an integral whole) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Research demonstrates that these are four markers of spiritual wholeness and integration ([Pargament, Desai, & McConnell, 2006](#_ENREF_15)). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Graham (2017) describes three interacting poles of lamentation—sharing anguish, interrogating suffering, and reinvesting hope, especially in the goodness of life (p. 139). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. “Caregivers may think chronic illness is only of concern during the acute crisis stage surrounding diagnosis, but people continue to incur losses over the ensuing years. The experience of chronic illness has been described as one of "shifting perspectives": at times the illness requires primary attention, at other times the illness shifts to the background of the person's consciousness” ([Arora, 2009, p. 22](#_ENREF_2)).

“As the focus on chronic illness shifts from background to foreground and new losses or crises occur, care seekers may need new ways of making sense of their illnesses, including new theological understandings of their experiences”([Arora, 2009, p. 34](#_ENREF_2)) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)